



State of Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent

STATE OF EDUCATION -- Excerpts

State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster

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A New Wisconsin Promise

I am honored to serve as your state superintendent, and it is a privilege to report to the people of Wisconsin on the state of education and to issue a call for action to local communities to pledge to a New Wisconsin Promise that ensures a future of quality education for all the children of our great state.

A New Wisconsin Promise that ensures quality education for economic growth. A New Wisconsin Promise that calls upon us to recommit to the conservation of public education as a democratic ideal.

The quality of life we have in Wisconsin and who we are today is a direct result of the investment made in us as children. Raising a family in Wisconsin has been built upon a promise of a public education that provided the chance to get ahead if you worked hard, did well in school, and were a responsible member of your community.

But, we are at a crossroads, and that promise will only stay alive for this generation of Wisconsin children and families if education truly prepares them for the knowledge-based economy of the 21st century.

The key strategies for PK-12 education in the economic growth and development of Wisconsin must be, No. 1, to close the gap in achievement that exists in our state between economically disadvantaged children or children of color and their peers.

ACT and SAT scores

Wisconsin's high educational achievement—No. 1 on the ACT, some of the highest SAT scores, and a statewide 90.83 percent graduation rate, fourth highest in country—shows that we know what we are doing in Wisconsin. Our success is one side of the story, the asset side.

Achievement Gap

Not only is closing the gap in achievement a moral imperative, but it makes the most sense economically.

Because the gap in achievement of our children is directly related to their economic disadvantage, we must develop the most efficient, effective, and fiscally sound response to children and families of poverty our state has ever seen.

Family and Community Partnerships

As your state superintendent, I have traveled from Superior to Stoughton, from Butternut to Beloit, listening, sharing, and learning from the people of Wisconsin. In those travels, I have seen firsthand how children are benefiting from school-family-community partnerships. And, I have heard firsthand that these efforts must be sustained over a long period of time if we truly want to see results.

ESEA – “No Child Left Untested”

With the beginning of this school year come new challenges with the federal education law. The federal government has mandated that we leave no child untested.

It is now our job in Wisconsin to bring people together around our commitment to truly leave no child behind.

We all want this federal law to succeed, because its goals of closing the gap and focusing resources on our neediest children are the right ones. So, don't let anyone ever question the knowledge or commitment of the Wisconsin education community for what it takes to raise student achievement. The commitment is real, and IT will not be left behind.

But, it will be difficult to meet the challenges we face to improve our schools with broken promises for funding.

Schools need the resources necessary for these reforms to work, but to date, the White House and Congress have left their commitment to resources behind.

Call to Action

But, we cannot wait, nor can we expect Washington, D.C., to act. We must not let their broken promises defeat the promise we all make to our students in the schools and classrooms of Wisconsin each and every day.

That is why I have issued a statewide community call-to-action for everyone, in every community across Wisconsin, to support our schools identified for improvement under federal law, which disproportionately serve children of poverty and are in 11 local school districts and one charter school of our state.

There are some who want to take the easy way out and label these failing schools, but they will only be failing schools if those same people decide to sit on the sidelines and choose not to be a part of the solution.

Reading Scores

Despite these challenges, our statewide reading test results have continued to improve, with 81 percent of Wisconsin third-graders scoring proficient and advanced.

While the reading test scores still show an achievement gap, we show gains for children of color and economically disadvantaged students. Milwaukee had its highest third-grade reading scores since the state began keeping data in 1998.

Keeping the Promise

The forward-thinking educational leaders who created the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act guaranteed that children with special needs receive the necessary services.

Under the 1975 law, funds from the federal government were to provide 40 percent of per-pupil expenditures. To date, Congress has contributed only a fraction of the funding—as little as 6 percent in some years and never more than 18 percent. Congress has consistently fallen short on its promise.

It is imperative to the future of I.D.E.A. that Congress makes good on its commitment to fund special education. We will tear our communities apart if special education and regular education become rivals for precious state and local dollars.

But, while we are waiting for Madison or Washington to act, today I am announcing the *Keeping the Promise Initiative* to put \$1.5 million of federal money in Wisconsin classrooms for direct services in educating high-cost children with special needs, including those children who are in need of nursing services and assistive technology who are not currently eligible for state reimbursement.

Although this money is limited and just begins to address the issue, I have decided to reprioritize federal discretionary dollars available for statewide projects. Today, I am making funds available for classrooms serving our neediest children.

Will this solve the issue we face in Wisconsin, where special education is pitted against regular education because of revenue caps from the state and broken promises from Washington?

No, but this issue is too important to ignore, and we must act now and continue to press both the state and federal governments to follow our lead and take ownership of this issue affecting every community in Wisconsin.

“State of Education is Strong”

The state of education in Wisconsin is strong, but our best and most important work is needed during the challenging times ahead.

The stakes are high, and the time for action is now.

Education for economic growth. Education for democracy.